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3 Engaging local communities with the governance of social and cultural infrastructures

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Abstract

While the engagement of local communities is a recurring theme and a key recommendation across the policy-focused literature on Social and Cultural Infrastructures (SCIs), there is a tendency to present both SCIs and 'community engagement' as unproblematic and inherently virtuous drivers of social cohesion or social capital. This obscures potential tensions around the function, resourcing, ownership and inclusivity of SCIs, as well as the significant evidence that participatory interventions can be ineffective and unrepresentative, undermine democratic processes, exacerbate inequalities and risk damaging the wellbeing of participants. In response, this paper seeks to support policymakers to determine appropriate methods for engaging place-based communities in the governance of SCIs. It draws on literature from a range of scholarly fields to examine three sets of cross-cutting challenges relating to place, assets, and community. This discussion informs a framework that is then applied to a discussion of seven approaches to community engagement, highlighting both their potential and limitations. The paper concludes by suggesting that community engagement can itself function as a form of SCI, yet, like all SCIs, is subject to contestation and requires significant investment to ensure effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. Policymakers are urged to think systemically by paying explicit attention to their strategic assumptions, contexts of implementation and modes of representation and to assess their capacity to support ethical practice, recognising and resourcing the labour of engagement. Where capacity does not extend to supporting engagement responsively and responsibly, policymakers should be transparent and consider other approaches to context-sensitive and equitable resourcing.

***Keywords*:** community engagement, participatory governance, political economies, ethics, systems thinking

Introduction

Though defined in various ways, the concept of Social and Cultural Infrastructures (SCIs) is broadly understood to have three key elements: first, the presence of physical sites or assets, potentially ascribed with cultural value; second, the ability to facilitate interactions between and within diverse sections of a community; and third, the ability to inculcate meaningful relationships, creative expression or cultural practice, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity among local people[1]. Key to this definition, and indeed a recurring recommendation across the policy-focused literature, is the engagement of local communities not just in the use and maintenance of SCIs but also in their *governance*: from defining terminology and setting agendas, to planning, implementation and evaluation[2].

However, there is a tendency in the policy-focused literature to present both SCIs and the notion of 'community engagement' as unproblematic and inherently virtuous drivers of democracy, social cohesion or social capital[3]. This obscures potential tensions around the function, resourcing, ownership and inclusivity of SCIs, as well as the significant evidence that participatory interventions can be ineffective[4] and unrepresentative[5], undermine democratic processes[6], exacerbate inequalities[7] and risk damaging the wellbeing of participants[8]. An additional layer of complexity is introduced by the notion of 'the local', which conceals assumptions about context, scale and homogenous experience.

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1 This definition is adapted from the British Academy's *Space for Our Community* report (2023) and the review by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (Kelsey and Kenny 2021).
2 Power to Change 2021; Department for Levelling Up 2022; Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy 2023; The British Academy 2023.
3 Voorberg et al 2015; Bakker 2015; Verschuere et al 2018.
4 Williams et al 2016; Slasberg and Beresford 2017; Bradsen et al 2018; Osborn et al 2018; Bussu et al 2022b.
5 Neblo et al. 2010; Xoco et al 2023; Harris 2021.
6 Cooke and Korathi 2001; Ishkanian 2014; Bouchard 2016; McMullin and Needham 2018; Steen et al 2018;
7 Hickey and Kothari 2009; Dillon et al 2011; Brandsen et al 2016; Stein et al 2018; Bua and Bussu 2023.
8 Honingh & Brandsen 2018; Wilson et al 2018; Banks & Westoby 2019; Bell et al 2021; MacKinnon et al 2021

In response, this paper seeks to support policymakers to determine appropriate methods for engaging place-based communities in the governance of SCIs by drawing on research from the fields of social policy, public administration, political economy, international development, participatory governance, human geography, community development, urban design and heritage studies, to examine three sets of challenges relating to *place, assets,* and *community*. This expanded understanding is then applied to a discussion of seven approaches to community engagement, highlighting both their potential and limitations.

The paper concludes by suggesting that community engagement can itself function as a form of SCI, yet, like all SCIs, is subject to contestation and requires significant investment to ensure effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. Policymakers are urged to pay explicit attention to their strategic assumptions, contexts of implementation and modes of representation and to assess their capacity to support ethical practice, recognising and resourcing the labour of engagement. Where capacity does not extend to supporting engagement responsively and responsibly, policymakers should be transparent and consider other approaches to context-sensitive and equitable resourcing.

Unpacking community engagement with the governance of SCIs

The notion of 'local community engagement with SCIs' includes a series of assumptions about context, representation and the social and material elements that comprise communities, systems of governance and SCIs themselves. In response, this Section draws on a range of academic and applied research to interrogate the concepts of *place, assets* and *community* in order to arrive at an expanded understanding.

Place*: *the challenges of context and scale

Place-based approaches (PBA) are initiatives delivered at a specified local level, usually with the aim of reducing regional inequalities by redistributing resources and responding to the needs of specific contexts[9]. PBAs have enjoyed a long history in the UK across the devolved nations and most recently, through the national Levelling Up agenda[10], and a plethora of indices have been developed to measure the presence, distribution and experience of SCIs in different parts of the country[11]. Though initially framed as an alternative to spatially-blind or 'people-focused' approaches to policy, increasing recognition of the seamless interaction between people and places has led to a 'people-in-places' framing of PBAs[12]. However, within this approach there remains some discrepancy over what constitutes 'the local' and whether it is defined through measurable geographical coordinates such as *location*; material-social configurations such as *locale*; or, more subjectively through personal or collective perception as a *sense of place*[13]. This interplay between geography, material environment, social experience and personal (or shared) meaning can be contentious, with approaches favouring the distribution of SCIs by location sitting in tension with those that respond to a more subjective sense of the meaning to different groups in specific places. Further conflict exists between scales of 'the local'. While the literature tends to agree that policy approaches to address inequality should focus on SCIs at the neighbourhood level[14], critical geographers suggest that even neighbourhoods like council estates are characterised by concentric and often contested social scales spanning

9 Lowndes and Sullivan 2008; Matthews et al 2012; Crew 2020; Marmot 2020
10 What Works Scotland (Scottish Government 2019); Communities First and the Community Renewal Fund in Wales (Baker 2022); the Social Investment Fund in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Executive 2018); England's New Deal for Communities (UK Government 2022) .
11 E.g. the Index of Priority Places, Left-Behind Places (OCSI's Community Needs Index), Thriving Places Index; Heritage Index, Co-op Community Wellbeing Index, Social Fabric Index, and the proposed Community Asset Register; each of which utilise different indicators at different levels of granularity.
12 Green, 2023.
13 Cresswell 2009.
14 Power to Change 2021.

streets, blocks of flats and homes[15]. Research into place-attachment, for example, has shown that despite evidence of positive neighbourly experience at the level of the block or street, sublimation of these hyper-local units within a stigmatised portrayal of the council estate has been used to suggest lack of attachment in order to justify demolition[16]. Moreover, SCIs are distributed unevenly across these scales, for instance, through micro-segregation whereby social housing tenants have been excluded from facilities, which their privately renting or home-owning neighbours can access[17].

Policy approaches that limit SCIs to the local level can also be constrained in effectiveness. A review by IVAR for Lankelly Chase[18] contrasted *communitarian* approaches (which locate both problems and solutions in the characteristics of neighbourhoods and residents) to *systemic* and *structural* approaches (that work with regional and national policy instruments to improve local systems by tackling the structural causes of deprivation and inequality). To be effective, PBAs should be considered in the context of broader systems, should be multi-scalar and integrated across different policy domains[19] and should be applied in tandem with "wider investment and poverty reduction strategies if they are to make a significant contribution."[20]

However, scale also has a temporal dimension. The social and material boundaries of place are constantly shifting, whether in response to administrative reform (which renegotiates *location*), regeneration (transforming *locales*) or events such as Covid-19 (which transformed residents' *sense of place* as social interaction shrunk to the 'hyperlocal' or shifted online[21]). A place-based approach to engagement with SCIs should therefore be explicit about its localities and scales and the politics enacted through them, recognise the emergent nature of place, taking into account histories (and potentially futures[22]) and the implications for different timeframes of participation ranging from one-off events to participation across generations.

Assets: the challenge of resourcing and capacity

Asset-based approaches map physical (and potentially, economic, environmental, institutional, human, social and cultural) resources or sources of 'capital' and are increasingly popular alternatives to deficit models of community development that emphasised need in the absence of resources[23]. In the UK, asset-based approaches have evolved from an interest in *access* to that of *ownership*, with 'Community Asset Transfer' (CAT) first established by New Labour, extended through David Cameron's localism agenda as Community Rights and introduced as Community Ownership Funds as part of Boris Johnson's Levelling Up strategy[24]. This pluralist focus on 'community power'[25] as separate from both state and market, has informed a body of policy-focused literature on SCIs, which builds on the work of Eric Klinenberg to highlight the availability, quality, accessibility and uses of SCIs, some of which might serve 'accidental' rather than 'intentional' functions in different contexts and for different groups[26]. However, as with the notion of 'place', SCIs are not static but evolve over time. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic

15 Kusenbach 2008; Lewicka 2011.
16 Watt 2022.
17 Middleton and Samanani 2022; Horton and Penny 2023.
18 IVAR 2017 and see also Cleaver 2001 on 'the limits of the local'.
19 Green 2023.
20 What Works Scotland 2019; Baker 2022.
21 Morrison et al 2020.
22 E.g. Raekstad and Gradin (2020) on prefigurative 'local-to-societal' strategies.
23 Green and Haines 2015; Rippon and Hopkins, 2015; McLean et al. 2017; Blickem et al 2018.
24 See Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023), though the diversity of community-based organisation working through different types of assets should be noted (Aiken 2011; Henderson et al 2021) as well as the role of policymakers in enabling (or prohibiting) effective asset-transfer/management. For example, a report for LGA by Locality identified the importance of clear strategy, support for community-based organisations, long-term leases and transparency of decision-making and showed how councils demonstrating political commitment to community ownership are more likely to invest resources to develop a supply pipeline and work with communities to build capabilities. For example, Cornwall's Community Estates strategy involves developing a comprehensive map of assets available for future community ownership (Locality 2020; LGA 2022).
25 Power to Change 2022.
26 The British Academy and Power to Change, 2023.
27 Together Coalition 2020; Local Trust 2021.

exposed the benefits of established assets in community responses to the crisis[27] while revealing the devastating impact of austerity on diminished assets, challenges to the sustainability of assets beyond crisis-management[28], the uneven distribution of assets[29] and the rise of newly valued assets, such as digital infrastructure[30].

A significant body of evidence from the field of critical urban geographies[31] has also suggested that a civic-liberal 'politics of provisioning' (such as that favoured by the policy-focused SCI literature) tends to neglect the role of power and the fact that SCIs can be *contested*, with the aims of certain assets (e.g. those promoting gentrification) potentially undermining others (e.g. informal social infrastructures within council estates)[32] while reproducing or even exacerbating inequalities[33]. Similarly, research into 'community anchors' in Scotland has suggested that smaller organisations tend to struggle in neo-liberal policy contexts concerned with efficiencies, economies of scale, and market solutions[34]. Asset-based approaches as a key component of David Cameron's 'Big Society' initiative were also critiqued in evaluations for being less appropriate to contexts characterised by deprivation, underinvestment and division[35], for undermining the importance of meaningful public investment through progressive taxation[36], for privileging groups who are less vulnerable to inadequacies in services[37], and for absolving the state of responsibility and accountability as the lines between the public, private, voluntary sectors are blurred[38]. A key point here is that SCIs are not politically neutral and cannot be separated from the political economies and the social structures in which they are embedded.

Finally, a range of scholars from the arts and humanities as well as urban geographers and political economists have criticised asset-based approaches for failing to recognise their dependency on low or unpaid labour (which is often gendered or otherwise unevenly distributed[39]) and for emphasising products over process and participation[40]. These points suggest that more attention is needed to understand the capacity requirements and resourcing of engagement with SCIs. A good example is Gateshead Council's commitment to strengthen their existing community assets portfolio before expanding, by offering support with business planning to develop the capabilities of community centres to deliver services[41]. Conversely, research from Brunel's former Centre for Citizen Participation noted that effective engagement also requires changes in the structures and cultures of institutions and infrastructures to render them more 'community friendly' and accessible[42]. However, developing and sustaining 'in-house' capacity for public services, decision-making mechanisms and engagement requires significant investment. There is a growing tendency to outsource much of this work to private consultant[43], which critics claim is fuelling a burgeoning 'engagement industry'[44] that risks

28 Standring and Davies 2020.
29 Macmillan 2020, Morrison et al 2020; Taylor and Wilson 2020.
30 Westoby and Harris 2020; Gilchrist and Taylor 2022.
31 Using critical political economy analysis – e.g. McFarlane and Silver 2017; Luke and Kaika 2019; Elliot-Cooper et a; 2020; Siemiatycki et al 2020; Penny 2022; Horton and Penny 2023.
32 See Horton and Penny (2023) who pose the question: whose infrastructures count? And discuss, amongst other examples, the promotion of 'social mixing' as a justification for speculative development of working-class residential areas and the often racialised dispossession and displacement of working class residents.
33 See Grey 2011 and Friedli, 2013. Power can also work more insidiously, e.g. through uneven distributions of digital infrastructure with implications for quality and accessibility but also environmental impact, increase in surveillance, exploitation of data and misrepresentation through biased algorithms (Gilchrist and Taylor 2022).
34 Henderson et al 2021.
35 Dillon et al 2011; Daly and Westood 2018.
36 Slasberg and Beresford 2017.
37 Ishkanian 2014; Daly and Westood 2018; McMullin and Needham 2018.
38 Dillon et al 2011; Steen et al 2018.
39 See O'Brien and Matthews 2015; Hall 2020; Holdo 2020; Strauss 2020. Horton and Penny (2023) employ AbdouMaliq Simone (2004)'s notion of 'people as infrastructure' to show how infrastructures such as playgrounds, libraries and community centres must be brought to life by (gendered and otherwise unevenly distributed) labour of those reproducing the services and connections that they enable.
40 For instance, Performing City Resilience noted in a House of Commons report that cultural funding often assumes an eventual artwork, when it could involve "brokering connections between artists, culture workers and city officials and bring these strategic placemakers together to reveal how they are addressing challenges and practices of place" DCMS, 2022. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcumeds/155/report.html#heading-2
41 Locality/LGA 2022.
42 Beresford 2021.
43 Steen et al 2018; Barry and Legacy 2022.
44 Lee 2015; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017; Bherer and Lee 2019; Barry and Legacy 2022.

undermining the capacity of the public sector to facilitate engagement, decontextualising support from specific contexts of policy and practice and detracting resources away from civil society due to high consultancy fees. Any consideration of the resourcing and capacity for community engagement with the governance of SCIs should therefore account for the labour of participation, evaluate the trade-offs surrounding short-term delivery with longer-term investment and establish whether investment in participatory processes might come at the expense of investment in inclusive infrastructure itself.

Community: the challenge of representation and inclusion

While the term ‘community’ features prominently in the policy-focused literature on SCIs, it is often presented as a static, homogenous, harmonious and even virtuous unit of analysis or site of intervention[45] that can be neatly separated from state and market[46] with unified interests that can be represented by individuals[47]. However, even proponents of community-led governance have recognised the interdependence of community-based organisations with the enabling (or inhibiting) apparatus of the state[48] as well as market-driven political economies[49]. Significant evidence from the fields of community studies and international development has revealed a tendency to decontextualise, depoliticise and homogenise communities, which conceals inequalities defined by age, gender and sexuality, income and education levels, (dis)ability, ethnicity, religion, visa status or housing tenure[50] and the fact that communities are not by nature virtuous, but can also be inward looking and ‘Othering’[51]. Conversely, scholars from across the arts, humanities and social sciences have argued that relational identity is dynamic and (re)configured through participation in family units, neighbourhood committees, interest groups, use of services and virtual platforms, and affiliation to formal organisations and social movements[52]. Communities are also characterised by transience, both in the context of daily mobilities, which are influenced by (and themselves influence) the material environment[53], and as circumstances change and people move in and out of identities and places[54]. These shifting contexts and identities limit the effectiveness of short-term engagement, suggesting the need for more emergent and sustained approaches to participation and ethics[55].

This complexity creates significant challenges for the representation of diversity. Empirical evidence from the field of deliberative democracy has shown that participatory initiatives have struggled to recruit participants, particularly from more excluded groups[56] as those from more affluent neighbourhoods and with higher levels of wealth and education are more likely to have an interest in participating as well as the sense of being *capable* of participating[57] and the resources to participate[58]. Evidence from across the fields of international development and community studies has also shown that wealthier and higher qualified residents benefit more from engaging with policy processes, which may exacerbate inequalities in the distribution of resources as well as the inclusivity of their design[59]. Within deliberative approaches, inequalities

45 Gilchrist and Taylor (2022) distinguish between descriptive uses of the term community (as a group sharing certain characteristics), normative uses (how groups should operate morally), and instrumental uses (suggesting agency to achieve common ends).
46 Pollard et al 2021; Lent and Studdert 2021.
47 Either quantitatively through aggregated survey responses, or qualitatively, through inclusion of ‘community representatives’.
48 Aiken et al 2011; Henderson et al 2022; Bussu et al 2022b.
49 Horton and Penny 2023.
50 Cooke and Kothari 2001; Minkler, 2005; Osborn et al 2009; Mikesell et al 2013; Gilchrist and Taylor 2022.
51 Cochrane 2007; Berkeley 2020.
52 Facer and Enright 2016; Banks and Westoby 2019.
53 Pred 1984; Seamon 1984; Massey 1993.
54 Mayo 2017; Gilchrist and Taylor 2022.
55 Liston 2014; Banks and Westoby 2019.
56 Neblo et al. 2010; Xoco et al 2023; Harris 2021.
57 van Eijk et al 2017.
58 Dillon et al 2011; Daly and Westood 2018; Steen et al 2018; Morrison et al 2020.
59 Blair 2000; Gaventa 2004; Liston 2014; Daly and Westood 2018.

and power relations distributed along 'hierarchies of knowledge' can also influence group dynamics and undermine democratic decision-making[60] and intersectional exclusions can arise from 'adult-centric, heteronormative and ableist assumptions' built into planning processes, as well as a lack of awareness of specific traditions or cultural idiosyncrasies that can affect participation[61]. However, as philosophers such as Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò have cautioned, there is a danger that 'identity politics' (or a superficial focus on crudely defined demographic categories) without due consideration of the underlying systemic inequalities can reproduce rather than alleviate those inequalities[62].

Seven approaches to community engagement with the governance of SCIs

Returning to the three defining elements of SCIs (physical sites, social/cultural interaction and the creation of social/cultural value) the analysis above suggests that an aspirational model for 'local community engagement' might be viewed as a type of SCI. It manifests in material settings, which must be resourced and maintained (whether community centres, public offices or digital fora). It facilitates interaction between different groups (whether place-based, identity-based or issue-based). And it strives to generate value (whether individually developmental, social, cultural, political or economic). However, the analysis has also revealed profound challenges surrounding assumptions about place, assets and community that can undermine engagement. It has revealed a need for sensitivity to context and dynamic spatial and temporal scales, for careful consideration of the ways in which communities are represented and any barriers to inclusion that specific groups might face and for commitment to the necessary capacity for engagement with implications for resourcing.

This section applies these challenges to a review of different approaches to community engagement. Though often conflated under the banner of 'participation', these approaches (including *participative methods; public engagement; user involvement; peer research; multi-stakeholder partnerships; co-production/creation;* and *deliberative governance*) have been shaped by academic research, professional practice and policy initiatives in multiple contexts around the world[63]. This section classifies these initiatives into seven broad approaches, and highlights their contributions, the way they respond to the challenges of context and scale, representation and resourcing and finally, the risks of the 'Dark Side of Participation'[64].

[60] This is referred to by Cooke and Kothari (2001) as the 'tyranny of the group' (see also Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Sunstein, 2009; and Di Lorito et al 2017).
[61] Bussu et al 2022a.
[62] Táíwò 2022.
[63] While contemporary research on community engagement has been dominated by the scholars based in Europe and North America (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2007; Tandon and Hall 2017), the origins of participatory practice can be traced back to the 'Majority World' (Tandon and Hall 2014).
[64] Cooke and Kothari 2001; Bouchard 2016; Williams et al 2016; Steen et al 2018; Oliver et al 2019.

Table 1: Seven approaches to local community engagement with the governance of SCIs

	Contribution	Context and Scale	Representation	Resourcing	Risks
1. Popular education	Awareness raising and critical analysis of SCIs (e.g. function, access, ownership) embedded in political economies	Place-based, hyper-local or municipal. Ongoing, often linked to other resident-led decision-making.	Power-conscious collective discussion. Potential exclusions of certain groups due to local power dynamics.	Sustained by community leaders who have been trained in the approach.	Limits of the local (can be ineffective); and subject to local politics.
2. Project-based participation	Local knowledge maps and visual analyses of distribution, access, engagement with SCIs to inform planning.	Usually place-based but could be identity or issue based. Framed by project timelines.	Can be power-conscious but framed by project agendas and their specific definitions of 'community'	Usually led by a consultant or external expert. Can be costly.	Can be extractive, tokenistic or cooptive if externally imposed.
3. User involvement	Aggregated opinions of a range of individual members of the public around plans for SCIs.	Less explicitly place-based. Usually framed by planning timelines but could be ongoing via advisory boards.	Challenges around recruitment and representation. Opinions individualised and aggregated rather than negotiated collectively.	Public sector facilitator or outsourced to a consultant (in which case can be costly.)	Can be unrepresentative, tokenistic and inflate expectations.
4. Peer research	In-depth access to lived experience of specific groups in relation to their perceptions and use of SCIs.	Could be place-based or identity/issue based. Peer researchers usually recruited for specific projects, but could be part of longer-term advisory networks.	Peer researchers recruited to represent experience, but can lead to downplaying other differences in demographics, identity or circumstances.	Extensive training required and complex ethics involved to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of peer researchers and respondents.	Risk of harm to welfare/wellbeing and training can be time consuming.
5. Participatory governance	Evidence-informed consensus on key policy decisions relating to SCIs from a representative sample of citizens.	Tends to be larger-scale (city/town, region or council level). Usually one-off initiatives, but can be institutionalised as jury-style service.	Representative recruitment (on the basis of official demographics) is essential. Outcomes are not individual opinion but collectively negotiated consensus.	Higher costs associated with representative recruitment. Deliberative capabilities required.	Misrepresentation. Potential to undermine less formal democratic processes.
6. Organisational partnerships	Involvement of local organisations in the management (and potentially ownership) of SCIs	Tends to be longer-term initiatives with a tenancy of at least 10 years. Often rooted at ward level, but some assets can by managed at higher (or multiple) scales.	Communities represented by organisations rather than individuals. Representation can be diluted in multi-stakeholder partnerships were there may be issues of equality.	Significant capacity needed which can exclude smaller or less resourced organisations from participating.	Challenges around representation, capacity and hidden labour costs where volunteers are involved.
7. Polycentric systems	Co-operative self-organised governance (potentially scaled-up via institutionalised systems) involving place-based decision-making about SCIs as a set of collectively owned resources.	Diverse initiatives can be at any spatial scale/time-frame but institutionalised systems have been town/city level and longer-term, multi-scalar and emergent	Multiple opportunities for representation of communities in different spaces including anchor institutions, co-ops and participation in adult education, union and council-led initiatives plus collective dialogue.	Needs significant investment and leadership to bring constituent parts together and a nurturing policy environment as well as public support.	Works best at town/city level but extremely complex and can be unpredictable. Hard to embed and evaluate.

Popular education and critical analysis of SCIs

Grounded in the work of Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia and Paulo Freire in Brazil, the Latin American participatory movements of the 1970s mobilised knowledge from place-based communities to unpack the 'politics of everyday' by provoking critical analyses of systems of exclusion with an emphasis on collective learning to inspire transformative action[65]. These early examples of 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR) evolved into community-based research or place-based collaborations between communities and research institutions[66]. With roots in Marxist historical materialism, these approaches pre-empt the political economy analyses of contemporary critical urban geographers who recognise SCIs as contested, relational and multi-scalar, produced through (and reproducing) socio-spatial inequalities[67]. This raises questions such as: how and for whom is infrastructure designed, financed, and governed? And how does the identification of forms of collective life as 'social' negate other forms as 'anti-social'?[68] However, it also draws attention to the 'limits of the local' in place-based approaches and the challenges of resourcing and sustainability, with initiatives collapsing[69], or failing to embed[70], particularly in complex contexts characterised by deprivation, underinvestment and division[71].

Mapping SCIs through project-based participation

Influenced by PAR, scholar-practitioners from the field of international development studies developed a repertoire of participatory methods known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and later, Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)[72]. These tools included visual and embodied analysis of group dynamics, spatial and temporal 'social mapping', calendars, timelines and methods to elicit excluded voices. The analytical logic with its focus on linear timelines and cause-and-effect lent itself well to the planning and evaluation requirements of development projects. And while the intention was initially to challenge the supremacy of 'international experts' by empowering place-based communities to contribute their lived experience, the methods were rapidly mainstreamed and integrated into the structural adjustment programmes and Poverty Reduction Strategies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, leading to a critique of participation itself as a 'new tyranny'[73], which masked power in group dynamics, reinforced the agendas of governments or funders, and claimed methodological dominance. Originally framed as a radical, emancipatory concept, the codification of participation into technique transformed it into rationalist, predictable and measurable interventions[74]. Critics suggest this 'cleaning up' of local knowledge through mapping and ordering, discards any messy or unmanageable elements[75] and other methods could be better for accommodating the true 'mess' of community experience[76]. Standardised methods have also led to an increasingly professionalised (and commercialised) 'participation industry'[77] that risks directing resources to decontextualised (and highly paid) consultants instead of more sustainable community-based organisations and public sector facilitator[78]. However, the influence of PRA remains in the range of cartographic approaches used to chart the distribution and accessibility of SCIs and incorporate community perspectives into planning, including symbolic representation of place through arts-based methods[79], and 'citizen science' through Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), remote sensing software[80].

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65 Freire 1970; Fals Borda and Rahnema 1991; Díaz-Arévalo 2022.
66 Munck et al 2014; Tandon and Hall 2017
67 Siemiatycki et al 2020; Middleton and Samanani 2022; Power et al 2022.
68 Horton and Penny 2023.
69 Carlisle 2010.
70 Bussu et al 2022a.
71 Slasberg and Beresford 2017.
72 Chambers 1997; 2008.
73 Cooke and Kothari 2001
74 Eyben et al 2015.
75 Hickey and Korathi 2009.
76 Law, 2004; Thomas-Hughes 2018; Bua and Bussu 2023.
77 Lee 2015; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017; Bherer and Lee 2019; Barry and Legacy 2022.
78 Critics have also noted that such professionalisation and standardisation of originally radical movements is a form of 'elite capture' (Táíwò 2022) and 'virtue hoarding' (Liu 2021) which glosses over or even reproduces the systemic inequalities it is charged with addressing.
79 Facer and Enright 2016.
80 Hecker et al 2018; Davies and Mah 2020; Gharaibeh et al 2021

User involvement in the planning and production of SCIs

While PRA used place-based analysis to influence development projects and programmes, an alternative approach (developed through the fields of social policy and public administration[81]) incorporates users into the conception, development and evaluation of products and services. In the UK, the notions of 'co-creation' or 'co-production' evolved from the initially consultative practice of 'patient and public involvement'[82] into user-oriented participation in service design for public policy and urban planning[83]. While a comparative analysis by Carnegie identified several positive features (valuing people as assets; including different perspectives; building citizens' capacity; recognising the transformative potential of services and professionals as facilitators; working across sectoral boundaries; developing networks; and, realizing mutual benefits[84]) public policy scholars have suggested more critically that co-production can be used to legitimise services or exploit citizen capacity in response to local authorities' dwindling resources[85] and that the high transaction costs associated with participation might be better invested in provision of services themselves[86]. Studies have also shown that if participatory processes fail to meet inflated expectations, they can actually diminish rather than increase trust[87], leading to the 'co-destruction of value'[88]. Yet, whether intended as an accountability measure, a means of capturing resources or a more transformative programme of social justice, approaches to the co-creation and co-production of SCIs are framed within the timelines of product and service development, rooted within public administration, and unlike place-based and *collective* participatory approaches, tend to engage individual 'users' either aggregated through surveys[89] or brought together as 'committees' on advisory boards[90].

Peer research to explore the engagement of specific communities with SCIs

While co-production tends to be administered by researchers or consultants on behalf of policy-makers, 'peer research' is implemented by fellow 'community members' (defined by identity, experience or place), who might also participate in framing questions, analysing data and communicating findings[91]. This links back to the challenges of capacity (as extensive training is often required) and resourcing (as peer researchers are often inadequately compensated for their time)[92]. Other potential risks concern mental and physical safety and wellbeing, when vulnerable participants are brought into insecure spaces or engaged in sensitive topics due to their lived experience[93]. Studies suggest that these roles are also often gendered, with women more likely than men to feel obligated to volunteer or accept precarious and part time contracts and tend to absorb more of the emotional labour during participatory processes[94]. Finally, by focusing on 'specific communities' represented by 'peers', this approach runs the risk of portraying diverse communities as homogenous.

81 Voorberg et al 2015; Brandsen et al 2018; Smith et al 2022.
82 Ocloo and Matthews 2016.
83 Voorberg et al 2015; Brandsen et al 2018; Smith et al 2022 and see also, the extensive guidance produced by Nesta/New Economics Foundation (2009; 2013); The Co-Production Network for Wales (2018); Scottish Co-Production Network (2017); Northern Ireland Department of Health (2018) and Involve (2018).
84 Coutts/Carnegie 2019.
85 Brandsen et al 2018.
86 Bradsen et al 2018.
87 Fledderus 2015; Williams et al 2016.
88 Osborn et al 2018.
89 E.g. Community Life Survey, Taking Part Survey and the Place Satisfaction Index as well as consultations over platforms such as CommonPlace: https://www.commonplace.is and of specific groups such as 'creatives' (see House of Commons DCMS 2022).
90 E.g. 'Community Advisory Boards' – see Newman et al 2011.
91 Bell et al 2021; ICS 2023.
92 Bell et al 2021; MacKinnon et al 2021.
93 Di Lorito et al 2017; Wilson et al 2018; Banks and Westoby 2019.
94 Osborne et al 2009; Facer and Enright 2016; Honingh and Brandsen 2018) Griffin et al 2012.

Participatory governance in SCI policy

The incorporation of citizens into democratic processes[95] ranges from direct democracy (e.g. through localised referenda or 'street votes') to decentralised approaches to planning (such as participatory budgeting[96]) to 'mini-publics' or assemblies of demographically representative citizens, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making[97]. While traditional approaches to deliberative democracy open up 'invited spaces' for participation in formal governance processes[98], political scientists have suggested that contentious political engagement (or agonistic democracy) can also be necessary for social change[99] and have shown how deliberative space can be 'claimed' by movements as a means of transforming policy processes themselves[100]. Research into participatory governance raises important questions about the representative selection and recruitment of participants (usually by sortition but with challenges around diversity and inclusion), the nature of evidence (to inform deliberation), capabilities (including the confidence to deliberate as well as the dynamics of participation) and the ultimate impact of assemblies on policy[101] as well as the extent to which more radical processes might be sustainably 'embedded', which depends significantly on the policy context[102].

Collaboration in the delivery of SCIs through organisational partnerships

While the previous approaches have represented 'communities' through either place-based resident groups or representative individuals, a sixth approach involves collaboration between policymakers and community-based organisations. In the UK, the North American 'community anchor' model was first adopted by the New Labour Government and more recently, by the SNP Scottish Government through their 'community planning partnership approach'[103]. With aspirations for *community-leadership* (including financial self-sufficiency via community ownership of resources); *holistic collaboration* (across economic, social and policy sectors); and *responsiveness to context* (attending to inequitable distribution of resources and differing needs) challenges have been raised about the relationship between anchors and the state, the management of complexity in multi-stakeholder partnerships and the tension between visions of anchors as social change agents or a form of neoliberal community management[104]. Other models of place-based partnerships being piloted in the UK include 'cultural compacts', which bring together business, education providers, local authorities, cultural and community leaders and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Initial reviews conducted in 2020 by the Arts Council England and in 2022 by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee suggest the initiative has added value, despite the setbacks caused by Covid-19. However, challenges have included embedding diversity and inclusion into both the Compacts themselves and their programmes of activities and integrating a range of stakeholders into partnerships[105].

95 Elstub and Escobar 2019.
96 See Baiocchi 2001, 2005 on Porto Alegre and DCLG 2011 on approaches to PB in England.
97 E.g. citizen assemblies (like the Irish Citizens' Assembly, which informed the repealing of the 8th Amendment to the Irish Constitution on abortion) or more institutionalised mechanisms (such as the 'Ostbelgien Model'; a long-term citizen council which runs in a similar way to the UK's jury service) - Bächtiger et al 2018.
98 Cornwall 2002.
99 See Dean 2018 drawing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism.
100 See Bua and Bussu 2023.
101 Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Bächtiger et al 2018.
102 Bussu et al 2022a.
103 Henderson et al 2021.
104 Aiken et al 2011; Hendersen et al 2021.
105 Arts Council England/BOP Consulting 2022; House of Commons DCMS 2022.

Mobilising SCIs through polycentric systems

A final set of community engagement initiatives has roots in each of the previous approaches and might be referred to as the myriad social innovations enacted by community-based actors with, within and beyond the state. Given the diversity of initiatives, which range from grassroots activism to 'hacker' and 'maker' networks, to experimentation with collective intelligence, to larger-scale social movements to state-led initiatives[106], this set of methods is less reducible to an approach in its own right. However, a common thread is the transformative agenda to democratise not just policy processes but also economic and social arrangements, which distinguishes them from self-help, charity-focused initiatives or even the mutual aid networks popularised during the pandemic. Another shared feature is a commitment to 'the commons' (defined by political economist Elinor Ostrom as set of collective resources managed by groups for wider social benefit[107]). This commitment has led to co-operative approaches to self-organised governance, which in the case of the UK's Preston Model[108] have been scaled-up to city level through networks of multi-sector co-operatives, embodying Ostrom's concept of 'polycentric governance' – a system in which different groups contribute to distinct but connected decision-making processes. In the case of the Preston Model, these included anchor institutions, co-operatives development initiatives, community and co-operative banks, educational networks and Preston City Council. Given the range of individuals, groups, institutions, networks, methods and artefacts that characterise this work, a third common feature is the celebration of diversity as a route to inclusivity as well as a resource for accessing multiple knowledges[109]. And finally, this set of initiatives also includes a commitment to learning through formal and informal education, collaborative research and the practices of citizenship itself[110]. However, once again, the extent to which localised movements can be sustainably embedded into regional or national policy depends significantly on the nature of the policy context and can be actively hindered by institutionalisation[111].

A light through the 'Dark Side of Participation': recommendations for policymakers

Given the risks of ineffectiveness and unrepresentativeness and the potential to undermine democratic processes, exacerbate inequalities and risk damaging the wellbeing of participants, how can policymakers responsibly engage communities in the governance of SCIs? Despite the complexity of the literature on SCIs and community participation, some recent consensus exists around the merits of 'systems thinking' as a guide through the complexity of spatial and temporal scales, political economies and dynamic representations of community[112]. Four principles for a systems approach include: making starting assumptions explicit; responding to context; embracing difference; and accommodating emergence[113]. The recommendations from this brief discussion paper are therefore structured along those lines:

106 Della Porta 2020; Bussu et al 2022b; Bua and Bussu 2023
107 Hess and Ostrom 2007; Ostrom 1990; Poteete et al 2010; Coote 2017
108 Manley and Whyman 2021
109 Facer and Enright 2016; Fransman et al 2021; Bussu et al 2022a
110 Hecker et al 2018; Manley and Whyman 2021; Bua and Bussu 2023.
111 Bussu et al 2022a; Bua and Bussu 2023.
112 Liston 2014; Burns and Worsley 2015; Elstub and Escobar 2019; Chilvers and Kearnes 2020; Holdo 2020; Bussu 2022b; Bua and Bussu 2023.
113 Fransman et al 2021.

Be explicit about your 'starting assumptions'

Critics have highlighted 'the paradox of participation'[114] whereby the mainstreaming of approaches into any political project regardless of ideology[115] disconnects lived-experience from the social structures in which it is embedded, undermining the potential for political reform. Policymakers should therefore acknowledge their approach to community engagement and how it fits into the broader participatory ecology, whether the approach is place-based or project-based, uses participatory action research or peer research methods; involves users in the co-production of services, or citizens in deliberative governance, develops partnerships with civil society organisations, or supports or catalyses polycentric systems. Each approach includes its own assumptions about place and scale, representations of community and standards for the methods it advocates as well as its own values and ideologies. Consider how the approach relates to other scales and representations of community and what this means for inclusivity, effectiveness and sustainability. Consider hybrid and multi-scaler adaptations which responds simultaneously to place-based contexts and the broader political economies within and surrounding them.

Respond to dynamic contexts of community engagement

The 'places' of community are constantly shifting, whether in response to administrative reform, regeneration or longer-term environmental change. Policymakers should be explicit about their contexts of engagement, the histories and how they may evolve through and beyond engagement activities. Context analysis can identify demographic distribution as well as 'gatekeepers' at different scales. Political economy analysis can show how these stakeholders relate to each other and to broader systems[116]. Cartographic methods (including GIS) can be used to engage citizen scientists with specific locations or personalised places via more symbolic maps developed through arts-based methods. Mapping can be temporal as well as spatial, through local histories and community storytelling as well as 'futures approaches' including scenario planning, speculative visioning and future-oriented urban design[117]. Such context mapping will enable policymakers to build on grassroots initiatives, networks and movements already in place and support meaningful engagement across multiple scales.

Carefully consider representation and inclusivity

Policymakers should choose an apt approach to selection and recruitment of community representatives, for example, through self-selection, sortition, purposive selection, election of a representative and hybrid combinations[118]. They should also monitor non-participation (which is chronically undocumented but vital for learning) and consider approaches targeted to traditionally excluded groups, such as 'responsive evaluation'[119], 'enclave deliberation', 'gender-responsive participatory budgeting' and 'queer participatory planning'[120], although intersectional thinking means moving beyond specific interest groups to respond to more complex and overlapping exclusions[121]. Ethical considerations also include decisions about compensation for participants or peer researchers and attention should be paid to the impact of financial renumeration on benefits in line with the latest regulations from the Department for Work and Pensions[122]. And finally, policymakers should consider an emergent approach to ethics, as in Banks and Westoby's approach to community development as "a constant process of negotiating and renegotiating consent."[123]

114 Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016.
115 Holdo 2020.
116 Whaites et al 2023.
117 Poli 2019.
118 Fung 2003; Elstub and Escobar 2019.
119 Visse et al 2014.
120 Bussu et al 2022b.
121 Wojciechowska 2019.
122 Since new restrictions have limited the use of vouchers, organisations are turning to charities such as 'Tempo Time Credits' who form partnerships with providers of goods and services to offer non-financial compensation.
123 Banks 2019: 26.

Develop capacity for responsive, adaptive and learning-oriented engagement

Participants can lack confidence in their capabilities, and peer research in particular demands significant investment in training and support[124]. Public professionals or government-based facilitators can also benefit from tailored training[125], while a perceived lack of 'in-house' capacity can lead policymakers to outsource engagement to consultancy firms[126]. However, capacity can also be developed through networked and embedded approaches to community engagement, for example, through the Preston Model's enrolment of universities and a 'co-operative education centre',[127] which support a culture of learning, reflection and research as an accompaniment to the community wealth-building objectives. While other approaches to 'popular education'[128] can build the capacity of communities to engage, policymakers can also connect with campaigns to create incentives for engagement, e.g. supporting a 4-day week, which could free up funded time for volunteering. Investment in engagement infrastructure can range from creating databases and catalysing networks of community stakeholders to the use of digital platforms and even collective intelligence (though the implications for inclusion and data-use should be carefully explored as well as the emerging literature on the use of artificial intelligence in decision-making[129]). Finally, policymakers should be mindful of the discourses produced through their engagement practices or the 'collateral realities'[130] that legitimise and reproduce certain ideas about community, participation and SCIs (such as their inherent virtue or neutrality).

This paper has shown how community engagement with its roots in specific material contexts, interactive dynamics and aspirations to social and cultural value can itself can function as a valuable SCI, yet, like all SCIs, is subject to contestation and requires meaningful investment to ensure effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. While approaches that address the complexities of context and power can mitigate some of the 'tyrannies of participation'[131], policymakers should consider the opportunity costs of expensive and ethically contentious engagement and be transparent about their capacity to adequately address potential risks before proceeding.

124 Bell et al 2021; MacKinnon et al 2021.
125 Brandsen et al 2018.
126 Raco M 2018; Bherer and Lee 2019; Barry and Legacy 2022.
127 Manley and Whyman 2021.
128 E.g. Freire 1970.
129 See Brandsen et al (2018) on the creation of 'algorithmic black boxes' which can limit control and Rambaldi et al 2006; Brandsen et al 2016; Banks and Westoby 2019; Tan et al 2022.
130 Law 2004.
131 Hickey and Mohan 2004.

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